

Rep. Slaughter Addresses the Lobbying Accountability and Transparency Act - May 3, 2006

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Mr. Chairman, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

There is certainly an "Alice in Wonderland" quality to this debate already this afternoon where Alice could believe 90 possible things before breakfast, and to believe that we all worked together on this bill is absolutely not true. Democrats and Republicans have worked hard, but in different alleys, going in different directions.

To that end, I would like to submit for the record at this point from The Post this morning an editorial entitled, "Kill this Bill," along with several others. Every editorial group and outside organizations have said this bill is a hollow sham.

"Bold, Responsible, common-sense reform of our current lobbying and ethics laws is clearly needed," House Rules Committee Chairman David Dreier (R-Calif.) told his colleagues on the House floor last week. "We owe it to our constituents. We owe it to ourselves. We owe it to this institution."

Very true--which is why House members should reject the diluted snake oil that Mr. Dreier and the GOP leadership are peddling as bold reform. Their bill, which is expected to come before the House for a vote today, is an insult to voters who the GOP apparently believes are dumb enough to be snookered by this feint. The procedures under which it is to be debated, allowing only meaningless amendments to be considered, are an insult also--to the democratic process.

At best the bill would marginally improve the existing arrangement of minimal disclosure, laxly enforced. Reporting by lobbyists would be quarterly instead of twice yearly and slightly more detailed (with listings of lobbyists' campaign contributions--already available elsewhere--along with gifts to lawmakers and contributions to their charities). Nothing would crimp lawmakers' lifestyles: Still allowed would be meals, gifts (skybox seats at sporting events, say) and cut-rate flights on corporate jets. Privately sponsored travel would be suspended, but only until just after the election.

The provisions on earmarks are similarly feeble. Lawmakers who insert pet projects in spending bills would have to attach their names to them--but that's all. If that happens, these provisions wouldn't be subject to challenge. Earmark reform that wouldn't allow a vote to stop future ``Bridges to Nowhere" isn't real reform.

Matching the anemic measure is the undemocratic procedure under which it will be ``debated" on the House floor. Nine amendments are to be considered, including such tough-love provisions as ``voluntary ethics training" for members and holding lobbyists liable for knowingly offering gifts whose value exceeds the gift limit. (Not to worry: Legislators wouldn't be liable for accepting them.) The Rules Committee refused to permit votes on amendments to strengthen the measure, including proposals to establish an independent ethics office; to require lawmakers to pay full freight for chartered flights; or to double the waiting period for lawmakers to lobby their former colleagues from one year to two. Neither would the majority risk an up-or-down vote on the much more robust Democratic alternative.

Democrats tempted to vote for this sham because they're scared of 30-second ads that accuse them of opposing lobbying reform ought to ask themselves whether they really think so little of their constituents. As for Republicans willing to settle for this legislative fig leaf, they ought to listen to Rep. Christopher Shays (R-Conn.). ``I happen to believe we are losing our moral authority to lead this place," Mr. Shays said on the House floor last week. He was generous not to have put that in the past tense.

Congress still doesn't get it. After more than a year of negative headlines about political corruption and money-soaked alliances with lobbyists, House leaders are weakening their already anemic excuse for reform.

They hope to pass the plan this week and then, with the glowing pride of grantees doling pennies to the poor, con the public into believing they're actually giving up enough of their prized perks to make a difference.

The plan--pushed by Rules Committee Chairman David Dreier and Majority leader John Boehner contains a few enticing illusions, such as modest changes in disclosure rules and pork-barrel spending restraints. But it's far from anything lobbyists might fear. In light of the tawdry political culture exposed by the sprawling case of super lobbyist Jack Abramoff, awaiting sentencing in Washington, the measure is most noteworthy for what it would fail to do:

Cushy travel paid for by private groups--a device lobbyists use to buy favors--would be banned, but only until after the election. Next year, it would be back to business as usual.

Lobbyists would be barred from flying on corporate jets with members of Congress, a response to calls to abolish this cozy form of special-interest access. But nothing would prevent executives who aren't registered lobbyists from continuing to do the same thing. And nothing would alter the practice of routinely making these planes available for members' political or personal trips at deeply subsidized fares.

There's no provision for creating a much-needed independent, non-partisan Office of Public Integrity to give credibility to probes of ethics complaints. Ethics committees of the Senate and House of Representatives have proven inadequate for the task.

House Republican leaders have dropped proposed requirements that lobbyists disclose which lawmakers and aides they have contacted and how they have raised money for politicians. As a result, lobbyists banned from paying \$100 for a congressman's restaurant dinner would remain free to pay \$25,000 or \$50,000 to underwrite a fundraising party to ``honor" the member.

Most rules allowing members of Congress and their staffs to accept gifts from lobbyists would remain unchanged.

The sorry record of this Congress cries out for real reform, not a toothless sham. One member has been sent to prison for extorting bribes from lobbyists and favor-seekers. Former House majority leader Tom Delay is under indictment on political money-laundering charges, two of his former aides have pleaded guilty to corruption charges, and he's quitting because he fears the voters' backlash. At least a half-dozen other members, from both parties, are under investigation by various federal agencies on everything from bribery to insider trading.

Not coincidentally, polls show public disillusionment with Congress at the highest levels in more than a decade. This is fueled in part by the lobbying and corruption scandals that show special interests and self-interest trumping the public interest.

If the self-righteous incumbents can't do better than this outrageous substitute for needed reform, they will deserve to be defeated in November.

The inclusion of something termed ``ethics training" in the House Republican majority's pending lobbying reform bill is the

ultimate touch of drollery. It is a public relations kiss-off acknowledging growing concern about the appearance of scandalous money ties between Congressional campaigners and their claques of loyal lobbyists. At the same time, it is clear notice that this ethically challenged Congress has no intention of doing anything serious about reform. The House majority leader, John Boehner, conceded as much in observing, ``The status quo is a powerful force."

As it is, Mr. Boehner has had to drag his members kicking and screaming to a vote this week on the cut-and-paste figments of reform that the House G.O.P. will be peddling to the voters this fall. The bill is even weaker than the Senate's half-hearted measure. Rather than banning gifts and campaign money from lobbyists, the bill embraces disclosure--the equivalent of price lists for the cost of doing business with a given lawmaker. A bipartisan attempt at true reform was squelched as non-germane, as if the need to create an independent ethics enforcement body is not obvious by now after the lobbyist corruption story of Jack Abramoff and his back-door power over lawmakers.

The Democrats are right to oppose the measure. Some Republicans, worried that it will be properly perceived as the Bill to Nowhere, did point out loopholes in the proposal to rein in the pork-barrel earmark gimmickry dear to lawmakers and lobbyists. But no credible fix was made.

After tough jawboning about ethics reform in response to the scandal centered on convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff, House Republican leaders have produced legislation that mocks its title, the Lobbying Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006.

In fact, the bill does little to increase accountability in the lawmaker-lobbyist relationship and is transparent only in its display of political showmanship and the absence of substance. Even after the conviction of a California congressman for bribery, the guilty pleas of two former aides to U.S. Rep. Tom DeLay and the widening net of the federal Abramoff probe, Congress, seems to be falling back into a ``What, me worry?" posture.

The House version that might be voted on this week is even weaker than its Senate counterpart, which government watchdog groups criticized as toothless. Jettisoned from the proposal were strictures on gifts to elected officials and a

requirement that legislators pay private charter rates for transportation on corporate jets. A ban on elected officials' acceptance of free junkets from private groups will extend only until after the next election, an indication that Congress lacks the resolve to give up a major perk.

Dropped by the wayside was a plan to invigorate the slumbering congressional ethics committees with an independent public integrity office. Also deleted were requirements that lobbyists disclose contacts with lawmakers and fund-raising efforts on their behalf, a system that allows lobbyists to funnel other people's campaign cash to buy influence with key officials. A spokeswoman for House Rules Committee Chairman David Dreier, R-Calif., told Roll Call the provision was removed because it ``could have a chilling effect on lobbying."

Given the disproportionate influence of highly paid special interest advocates on the legislative process in Washington, we thought limiting lobbyist clout over lawmakers was the whole point of reform. Dreier is apparently more concerned with the health and welfare of lobbyists than his own legislative body's reputation.

In a letter to lawmakers, a coalition of pro-reform groups appealed for the defeat of the legislation and the enactment of tough measures to rein in the influence of lobbyists. According to the missive, ``H.R. 4975 represents an effort by Members to have it both ways--holding on to the financial benefits and perks they receive from lobbyists and other special interests, while claiming that they have dealt with the lobbying and ethics problems in Congress. The public will not be fooled by this phony game."

Democracy 21 President Fred Wertheimer said the House bill ``is apparently based on the premise that you can fool all of the people all of the time." He points out the misleading language of the legislation, including ``a section called `Curbing Lobbyists' Gifts' that doesn't curb gifts from lobbyists, and a section called, `Slowing the Revolving Door,' that contains no provisions to slow the revolving door."

How many more members of Congress, their aides and lobbyists have to be convicted of fraud, bribery and abuse of voter's trust before legislators get the message that the public is serious about ethics reform?

In pretending that their bill is something other than a self-serving sham, House leaders demonstrate just how out of touch they are. If it passes, the next chance for ethics reform may come at the polls in November.

Austin.--Either the ``lobby reform bill" is the contemptible, cheesy, shoddy piece of hypocrisy that it appears to be or the Republicans have a sense of humor.

The ``lobby reform" bill does show, one could argue, a sort of cheerful, defiant, flipping-the-bird-at-the-public attitude that could pass for humor. You have to admit that calling this an ``ethics bill" requires brass bravura.

House Republicans returned last week from a two-week recess prepared to vote for ``a relatively tepid ethics bill," as The Washington Post put it, because they said their constituents rarely mentioned the issue.

Forget all that talk back in January when Jack Abramoff was indicted. What restrictions on meals and gifts from lobbyists? More golfing trips! According to Rep. Nancy L. Johnson of Connecticut, former chairwoman of the House ethics committee, passage of the bill will have no political consequences ``because people are quite convinced that the rhetoric of reform is just political."

Where could they have gotten that idea? Rep. David Hobson, R-Ohio, told the Post, ``We panicked, and we let the media get us panicked."

By George, here's the right way to think of it: The entire Congress lies stinking in open corruption, but they can't let the media panic them. They're actually proud of not cleaning it up.

The House bill passed a procedural vote last week, 216-207, and it is scheduled for floor debate and a final vote today--which gives citizens who don't like being conned a chance to speak. Now is the time for a little Cain-raising.

Chellie Pingree of Common Cause said, ``This legislation is so weak it's embarrassing." Fred Wertheimer, president of Democracy 21 and a longtime worker in reformist vineyards, said: ``This bill is based on the premise that you can fool all of the people all of the time. This is an attempt at one of the greatest legislative scams that I have seen in 30 years of working on these issues."

Come on, people, get mad. You deserve to be treated with contempt if you let them get away with this.

I'm sorry that all these procedural votes seem so picayune, and I know the cost of gas and health insurance are more immediate worries. But it is precisely the corruption of Congress by big money that allows the oil and insurance industries to get away with these fantastic rip-offs.

Watching Washington be taken over by these little sleaze merchants is not only expensive and repulsive--it is destroying America, destroying any sense we ever had that we're a nation, not 298 million individuals cheating to get ahead.

I'm sorry that these creeps in Congress have so little sense of what they're supposed to be about that they think it's fine to sneer at ethics. But they work for us. It's our job to keep them under control until we can replace them. Time to get up off our rears and take some responsibility. Let them hear from you.

The House Republican leaders managed a new feat of cravenness during the recent recess, hollowing out their long promised ``lobbying reform" bill to meet the dictates of--who else?--Washington's power lobbyists.

During two weeks of supposed inactivity, the leadership bill was chiseled down at the behest of K Street to an Orwellian shell of righteous platitudes about transparency and integrity. The measure to be debated this week has been stripped of provisions to require full disclosure of lobbyists' campaign fund-raising powers and V.I.P. access in Congress. The measure buries all attempts at instituting credible ethics enforcement in the House.

The nation should not be fooled. The proposal is a cadaverous pretense that Congress has learned the corrupting lessons of Jack Abramoff, the disgraced superlobbyist; Representative Tom DeLay, the fallen majority leader; and Duke Cunningham, the imprisoned former congressman. It makes a laughingstock of the pious promises of last January to ban privately financed junketeering by lawmakers. Instead, these adventures in quid pro quo lawmaking would be suspended only temporarily, safe to blossom again after the next election.

The bill's cosmetic requirements for limited disclosure are overshadowed by the brazen refusal to plug the loopholes for lobbyists' gifts or to end their lavish parties for ``honoring" our all too easily seduced lawmakers. The G.O.P. leaders can't even marshal the courage to rein in the shameful use of corporate jets by pliant lawmakers.

It's hard to believe that members of Congress mindful of voters' diminishing respect would attempt such an election-year con. One Republican proponent had the gall to argue that we mustn't ``chill" the right of lobbyists, the ultimate insiders, to petition government.

The true measure of the debate will be whether the House continues to suppress a bipartisan package of vigorous reforms offered by Martin Meehan, the Massachusetts Democrat, and Christopher Shays, the Connecticut Republican. These measures would at long last galvanize ethics enforcement and crimp the disgraceful symbiosis of lobbyist and lawmaker on Capitol Hill.

Do you remember, back when the spotlight was on Jack Abramoff, how House Republican leaders pledged to get tough on lobbyists? Well, you may; apparently they don't. The House plans this week to take up the Lobbying Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006, a watered-down sham that would provide little in the way of accountability or transparency. If the Senate-passed measure was a disappointment, the House version is simply a joke--or, more accurately, a ruse aimed at convincing what the leaders must believe is doltish public that the House has done something to clean up Washington.

Privately paid travel, such as the lavish golfing trips to Scotland that Mr. Abramoff arranged for members? ``Private travel has been abused by some, and I believe we need to put an end to it," said Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-III). But that was January; this is now. Privately funded trips wouldn't be banned under the House bill, just ``suspended" until Dec. 15 (yes, just after the election) while the House ethics committee, that bastion of anemic do-nothingness, ostensibly develops recommendations.

Meals and other gifts from lobbyists? ``I believe that it's also very important for us to proceed with a significantly stronger gift ban, which would prevent members and staff from personally benefiting from gifts from lobbyists," said Rules Committee Chairman David Dreier (R-Calif.) in--you guessed it--January. Now, Mr. Dreier's bill would leave the current gift limits unchanged.

Flights on corporate jets? No problem; the bill wouldn't permit corporate lobbyists to tag along, but other corporate officials are welcome aboard while lawmakers get the benefits of private jets at the cost of a first-class ticket.

Mr. Dreier's Rules Committee took an already weak House bill and made it weaker. From the version of the measure approved by the House Judiciary Committee, it dropped provisions that would require lobbyists to disclose fundraisers they host for candidates, campaign checks they solicit for lawmakers and parties they finance (at conventions, for example) in honor of members.

The bill would require more frequent reporting by lobbyists and somewhat more detail. Lobbyists would have to list their campaign contributions--information that's available elsewhere but nonetheless convenient to have on disclosure forms. And some additional information would have to be disclosed--meals or gifts that lobbyists provide to lawmakers, along with contributions to their charities. Some lawmakers want to strengthen the bill. But will the Rules Committee allow their proposals to be considered? Rep. Christopher Shays (R-Conn.) would require lawmakers to pay market rates for corporate charters. Mr. Shays and Rep. Martin T. Meehan (D-Mass.) would supplement the paralyzed House ethics committee with an independent congressional ethics office--needed now more than ever. House Democrats have a far more robust version of lobbying reform that deserves an up-or-down vote. Having produced a bill this bad, the Rules Committee ought at least to give lawmakers an opportunity to vote for something better.

Mr. Chairman, the sad thing I think here is that, as hard as we all worked, the Democrat amendments were not allowed. We had one out of the nine that are here today, and our package of rules changes and lobbying reforms were not allowed, but we will have a chance to vote for those on the motion to recommit, and I urge people to do that.

The esteemed Houston Chronicle columnist, Craig Hines, recently wrote that I and my Democrat colleagues are right to assail the lobbying reform bill last week, but he did not let us off the hook. There is one thing we did not do, Mr. Hines said, we should have been tougher, and he is right. There is no need to mince any words here. The issue at hand is just too important to allow for pleasantries.

This bill is a sham; and by promoting it as a real reform measure, Republicans are lying to the American people.

Consider what Mr. Hines said about it. "The bill," he wrote, "is designed to get the ruling Republicans past the November election. Period." He said that with this bill Republicans are hoping to "keep control of the House with a minimum change in the way the majority party has come to do business."

And he is not alone. Every major editorial board in the country has roundly denounced this legislation. Today's Washington Post calls it "deluded snake oil" and said that it "is an insult to voters who the GOP apparently believes are dumb enough to be snookered by this feint."

Last week's Roll Call said the bill "makes a mockery of its own title"; and the New York Times, calling it the "lobbyist empowerment act," noted that the Republicans have buried "all attempts at instituting credible ethics enforcement in the House."

The person who is head of the lobbying organization, when asked about it, he said, oh, that little thing, absolutely in his belief saying there is nothing here.

To my friends on both sides of the aisle, your constituents are watching. If you vote for this bill, you are telling them that you are not serious about ethics reform. You are saying that you accept the leadership that promotes dishonest legislation and one that brazenly lies what its bills will do.

Despite Republican proclamations to the contrary, the scope of what this bill does not do is nothing short of stunning.

In January, the Speaker of the House, Representative Hastert, called for an end to privately funded travel, but this bill does not end it. It merely bans it until December, one month after the election, when the Ethics Committee is supposed to weigh in on the matter. Of course, Republicans have shut down the Ethics Committee for a year and a half, and I do not expect it to rule on anything significant anytime soon.

Back in January, my colleague on the Rules Committee, Representative Dreier, said we should institute a much stronger gift ban, but the bill does not do that either.

Last week in the Rules Committee, Republicans voted down 20 more commonsense Democratic amendments out of 21 submitted, and that is 95 percent. They rejected an amendment that would prohibit securities trading by Members and their staff based on nonpublic information. They vetoed a requirement that top officials report contacts that they have with private parties seeking to influence government action. They turned down a ban on gifts from lobbyists and an end to the inherently anti-Democratic K Street project.

Mr. Chairman, these endless omissions would be bad enough on their own, but the real reason why this legislation is such a disappointment, the real reason why it is such a missed opportunity to create the reform Americans are demanding is that it does nothing, nothing, to fix the battered and broken political process of this Congress.

The rules of the House and the procedures enshrined within it during our first two centuries as a Nation were conscientiously designed to be a vaccine against corruption in this body by maintaining an open and transparent legislative process, by allowing bills to be debated and amended, by permitting Members of Congress to actually read and reflect upon legislation before they are forced to vote on it. Through these means, Congress was supposed to be freed from the temptations of corruption that our Founding Fathers knew lurked in the shadows. But during the last 11 years of the Republican leadership, those shadows have spread, and today, it is hard to see the light anymore.

The results have been as outrageous as they have been predictable. Corruption has become commonplace. Members no longer need to fear public scrutiny of their actions because they work in secret, as do the lobbyists who court them and whom they court in return, all 35,000 of them. Nor do they need to forge agreements with others to get provisions through the House; they just slip them into large bills without telling anyone.

The system is broken, and as long as it is broken, it will remain corrupt. This bill was supposed to change this abysmal reality, but it will not change a thing. If we pass this legislation as it is written, secret last-minute perks and protections for big business will still be routinely added to the conference reports. The Rules Committee will still deny anyone not in the majority the right to amend legislation. Major thousand-page bills will still be dropped on the desk of Members only minutes before they have to vote for them. And when the time for the votes has come, the arm twisting and influence peddling on the very floor of this House will continue unabated, and it will go on 10 minutes, 20 minutes, an hour, even 3 hours after votes have officially ended, whatever it takes to jam the agenda of the majority through the gears of our deteriorating democracy.

None of these un-American shameful practices are even addressed in this bill, let alone prohibited. And then, as far as the majority is concerned, that will be that. The public cried out for reform after they realized the degree to which their trust and good will were being abused, and the Republicans promised change, but they have gone back on their word. This is the very opposite of a reform bill. It is instead a steadfast and cynical defense of an indefensible status quo.

Mr. Chairman, let me again address my friends on both sides of the aisle. Some of you may be afraid that a vote against this bill will be portrayed by your opponents back home as a vote against reform. But it does not have to be that way because you do have a choice here today. I will be offering a substitute in the form of a motion to recommit that will do everything the Republican bill does not and will deliver everything that the American people expect from lobbying reform: it will ban travel on corporate jets as well as gifts and meals from lobbyists. It will shut down the K Street Project. It will end the practice of adding special interest provisions to conference reports in the dead of night. It will increase transparency for all earmarks, toughen lobbyist disclosure requirements and, most importantly, set up a structure for real enforcement of lobbyist requirements.

Today is a moment of truth for this Congress. You can vote for the Republican bill before us and tell an entire Nation that you really do not care about what it thinks, or you can vote ``yes" on the motion to recommit and pass the Democratic substitute. I urge my colleagues in the strongest possible words to do what is right for this Congress and for this Nation.

Mr. Chairman, I reserve the balance of my time.